

# Authoritarian Institution Building

## Electoral Politics and Ruling Party Formation in Post-Revolutionary Kyrgyzstan

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes President Bakiyev's post-revolutionary strategy of consolidating political power in Kyrgyzstan. Against the background of renewed elite conflict and political protest in 2006 and 2007, Bakiyev initiated a project of institutional reform that aimed at centralizing political power. The constitutional changes of 2007, the creation of *Ak Zhol* as a single pro-presidential "party of power," and the early 2007 parliamentary elections are part of this project of authoritarian institution building. Ultimately, this policy aims at reducing the volatility of elite alignments in Kyrgyzstan by stabilizing a presidential support coalition in the form of *Ak Zhol* and monopolizing access to the formal political system.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Initially hailed as signifying the advent of people's power to Central Asia (Olcott 2005), the 2005 "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan (or the "March events" as the ouster of President Akayev is more commonly – and perhaps more prudently – referred to in Kyrgyzstan) has since ceased to evoke much enthusiasm among observers.<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately following the tumultuous events of March 2005, analysts began to caution against interpreting what had happened in the framework of the post-communist "Colored Revolutions" that had led to the overthrow of unpopular presidents in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. Pointing to the rather limited nature of change in the Kyrgyz case, it has been maintained that the Tulip Revolution would better be described as leading to a "transfer of power," rather than regime change (Radnitz 2006), and that the events should be characterized as a coup d'état, rather than a revolution (Abazov 2007).

This somewhat sober and cautious account of the March events by now seems to be almost commonplace among academic observers (see Cummings 2008, Cummings & Ryabkov 2008, Hale 2006, Juraev 2008, Kulov 2008, Radnitz 2006). Recent studies shedding light on the structures of mobilization employed in the revolution (Radnitz 2006, Temirkulov 2008), on the post-revolutionary developments in such fields as state-crime relations (Kupatadze 2008) or constitutional reform (Kachkeev 2008), have further qualified the picture of the Tulip Revolution as a popular movement against the increasingly autocratic rule of former President Akayev in important respects. In the light of this research it seems clear that neither should the transformative power of the March events be overestimated, nor can the Tulip Revolution be convincingly construed as a mass-based popular revolt against rigged elections or political oppression more generally. What actually happened in Kyrgyzstan was both, more limited in terms of the changes it brought and more elitist in terms the structures of mobilization (see especially Radnitz 2006).

Taking the Tulip Revolution as a point of departure, this paper aims at analyzing post-revolutionary politics in Kyrgyzstan. If the Tulip Revolution did not lead to the establishment

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<sup>1</sup> The views presented here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the OSCE Academy. I would like to thank Joldoshbek Osmonov for his invaluable support during field research in Bishkek and express my gratitude to the OSCE Academy for the financial and logistical support they provided.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will use the terms "Tulip Revolution" and "March events" interchangeably. I use the term "Revolution" only to denote the specific events (as indicated by the capitalization) and do not wish to imply any specific categorization of these events.

of a more democratic political order in Kyrgyzstan, what were the effects on the level of the political regime? If it was largely a project of disaffected political elites, what can the actions of these new elites in the first four post-revolutionary years tell us about the course the country is likely to take?

I argue that after an extended period of political instability and the resurgence of elite infighting in the months following the Revolution, since 2007 President Kurmanbek Bakiyev has opted for a strategy of consolidation by institutional reform. Analyzing the new president's attempts to consolidate power against the backdrop of the dissolution of the revolutionary coalition in the months following his election to the presidency in July 2005, I argue that a project of authoritarian institution building lies at the heart of this consolidation strategy. This strategy must be interpreted as an attempt to prevent the 2005 events from reoccurring by enhancing control over political life in general and the electoral arena more specifically. In this way, potential elite challengers are deprived of access to the formal political system and elite coalitions in the pro-presidential camp are stabilized.<sup>3</sup>

The introduction of a proportional representation (PR) electoral system based on closed party lists in autumn 2007, the formation of the presidential *Ak Zhol* (Bright Path) party only weeks later, this party's (engineered) landslide victory in the early parliamentary elections of December 2007 are the major components of the consolidation strategy. The 2007 elections and the opposition's acquiescence to massive electoral fraud following these elections more specifically seem to suggest that the consolidation strategy has been rather successful so far. With Bakiyev riding on a wave of apparent successes and the opposition in disarray, the president stands good chances of securing results similar to those of the 2007 parliamentary elections in the early presidential elections scheduled for July 2009, although his erstwhile allies started rallying around former PM and leader of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), Almazbek Atambayev, as a single opposition candidate.<sup>4</sup> Taken

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with Bakyt Beshimov (leader of the SDPK faction in the Zhogorku Kenesh), Dinara Moldosheva (MP for Ak Zhol and former UNDP consultant on electoral reform), Isa Omurkulov (deputy leader of SDPK parliamentary bloc and MP), Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See 24.kg, 'Kyrgyz opposition names presidential candidate,' 20 April 2009, (<http://eng.24.kg/politic/2009/04/20/7765.html>), and 24.kg, '3rd national opposition kurultai blessed Atamabev, Isakov to run for presidency,' 25 April 2009, (<http://eng.24.kg/politic/2009/04/25/7860.html>). In the meantime, opposition unity has again been compromised by the defection of *Ak Shumkar* leader Temir Sariyev who started his own presidential campaign, see 24.kg, 'Nomination of presidential candidates completes in Kyrgyzstan on May 18,' 18 May 2009, (<http://eng.24.kg/politic/2009/05/18/8029.html>), and 24.kg, 'Ak-Shumkar leader accused of opposition split-up attempts,' 08 May 2009, (<http://eng.24.kg/politic/2009/05/08/7966.html>).

together, political developments in Kyrgyzstan since 2007 suggest that Bakiyev and his team see the country's future in the Kazakh or Russian models, rather than in the largely utopian image of a "Switzerland of Central Asia".<sup>5</sup>

Bakiyev's attempts to restructure the political system will be placed in a larger context of conceptual discussions about ruling parties and regime stability in non-democratic political systems. I will briefly review the relevant discussions in the literature in order to arrive at theoretically supported hypotheses about possible effects of ruling party formation in the Kyrgyz case. In a second step, I will focus on the dissolution of the revolutionary coalition, the process of ruling party formation in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the 2007 parliamentary elections as a first test of the viability of such a strategy of consolidating power. By way of conclusion, I will present a preliminary assessment of the longer term feasibility of such a strategy in the Kyrgyz context and try to evaluate to what an extent the Kyrgyz experience conforms to the theoretical expectations formulated in the literature on non-democratic governance.

### **Ruling Parties and Elite Management**

Kyrgyzstan has long been thought of as Central Asia's "Island of Democracy" (see Anderson 1999). Indeed, political liberalization in Kyrgyzstan in the first half of the 1990s was more substantial than in any of the other Central Asian cases and the political environment in the country still stands out as the most liberal of the entire region, despite the fact that, since the second half of the 1990s, Kyrgyz politics started to converge towards the informal mode of non-democratic governance dominant in its neighboring states (Collins 2006). These traits of non-democratic governance have arguably been strengthened since the Revolution and now place the country firmly in the camp of competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way 2002).

The study of non-democratic types of political rule has been all but neglected by students of Comparative Politics ever since Juan Linz's seminal contribution to the field (Linz 1975). Only recently, in the wake of increasing uneasiness with the way in which democratization studies have come to dominate the comparative study of politics in the developing world in the form of the "Transition Paradigm" (Carothers 2002), attempts have been made to revive the study of authoritarian governance as a field of scientific inquiry in its own right. Part of this new focus have been efforts to account for the hitherto undertheorized fact that many non-democratic regimes display a range of formal institutions such as multiple political

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<sup>5</sup> This is a quip attributed to former President Askar Akayev.

parties, reasonably competitive elections, and parliamentary bodies, that usually would have been associated with democratic political systems (see Brownlee 2007, Lust-Okar 2005, Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, Geddes 2006, Schedler 2006, Magaloni 2008, Levitsky & Way 2002). A preliminary conclusion emerging from these discussions seems to be that such institutions are used by authoritarian incumbents to stabilize their rule by enhancing communication (Albrecht & Schlumberger 2004, Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, Hermet 1978), allowing the co-optation of potential challengers (Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, Koehler 2008), intimidating the opposition (Gandhi & Przeworski 2006, Geddes 2006) or contributing to the legitimation of authoritarian rule (Brooker 2000, Albrecht & Schlumberger 2004, Hermet 1978).

If the double phenomenon of formally institutionalized and durable autocracies can thus hardly be disputed, it seems to be less obvious how these institutions function as tools of authoritarian governance. I will propose an answer to this question for the Kyrgyz case by focusing on the formal institution of a hegemonic ruling party. Kyrgyz politics since independence – in the pro-presidential camp as well as the opposition – have always been dominated by personalities, rather than parties or other formal organizations. To the extent that parties played a role at all, they did so as coalitions rallying supporters around a prominent political figure, rather than real political organizations united by ideological commitments or common policy conceptions. Why should an incumbent president choose to create a dominant ruling party in such an environment, as Bakiyev did in 2007? Why, more generally, would authoritarian incumbents care to spend the resources necessary to institutionalize political support in a hegemonic<sup>6</sup> “party of power” in the first place, instead of managing their elite coalitions in a more flexible, informal manner congruent with the personalist style of leadership?

On a theoretical level it has been argued that hegemonic ruling parties are primarily a means for ensuring elite cohesion (Brownlee 2008, Magaloni 2008). By providing elite actors included in the ruling party with reasonably reliable expectations of future benefits, hegemonic parties can increase the stakes these actors have in the survival of the existing regime and distribution of power. In this view, elite actors are induced into investing in the existing distribution of power because the framework of the hegemonic ruling party provides the necessary degree of calculability to render promises of future pay-offs credible. In contrast to less institutionalized settings, these future pay-offs can be calculated with a reasonable

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<sup>6</sup> For the idea of hegemonic party systems, see Sartori 1976 and Magaloni 2006.

degree of certainty in the presence of a formally institutionalized ruling party that effectively controls access to public offices. Thus, hegemonic ruling parties represent “credible power sharing arrangements” (Magaloni 2008) and should be expected to stabilize elite alignments by allowing actors to form reasonably reliable expectations about future political inclusion, thereby providing additional disincentives for defections from the ruling elite.

The mere existence of a hegemonic party, however, can hardly be considered an indication for the relevance of these conceptual reflections, especially in the Kyrgyz case where the presidential “party of power” still has to fully prove its usefulness as a tool of authoritarian governance. I therefore hypothesize that in order to be considered an efficient tool of consolidating power in Kyrgyzstan, the newly founded presidential *Ak Zhol* party needs to strike a balance between the two competing concerns of exclusion and inclusion. On the one hand, it must exclude a sufficient number of actors from the dominant elite coalition so as to raise the expected pay-offs of continued loyalty for actors included in the coalition, and provide a credible threat of exclusion from the dominant coalition. On the other hand, the coalition must ensure a sufficient degree of inclusiveness so as to forestall the emergence of viable elite challengers that could provide alternative routes of access to the formal political arena. The successful solution of this inclusion-exclusion problem by *Ak Zhol* could solidify elite alliances by providing formal institutional incentives in terms of future spoils that would offset actors’ expected costs of continued loyalty to the dominant coalition.

I will try to assess the degree to which *Ak Zhol* can be considered to fulfill these functions by analyzing the creation of the new party in October 2007 as well as the composition and formation of its candidate list for the early 2007 elections, and by looking at how the 2007 elections have been used to monopolize access to the formal political arena in favor of *Ak Zhol* and to enhance central control over the political process. Before I turn to these matters, I will briefly discuss the context of elite instability against which Bakiyev’s project of institution building developed.

### **Elite Volatility and Constitutional Reform in Kyrgyzstan**

President Bakiyev’s project of institution building must primarily be seen against the background of the general volatility of elite alignments in Kyrgyzstan. In this section, I will shed light on the renewed infighting within the revolutionary elite after Bakiyev’s accession to power as both, an example for the general instability of elite alignments and an important context variable for the project of authoritarian consolidation pursued by Bakiyev.

Kyrgyz politics since independence have always been characterized by fluctuating elite alignments that were subject to frequent reconfigurations based on informal processes of bargaining and co-optation. It thus is almost impossible to establish a consistent dichotomy of incumbents and challengers that remains valid beyond a specific point in time. Rather, it seems more useful analytically to think of Kyrgyz elite structures as a cartel consisting of a limited but rather stable pool of politically relevant elites. Within this cartel, shifting coalitions determine the relative power position of each actor at a given moment in time. Due to the high degree of fluctuation and instability in elite alignments, exclusion from the dominant coalition usually is only temporary and rarely amounts to exclusion from the elite cartel as such. To put it differently, a member of today's ruling coalition may well be tomorrow's opposition leader and vice versa, without ever losing his position as a politically relevant member of the elite cartel.<sup>7</sup> This extreme volatility in elite alignments naturally produces a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability and is arguably one of the major forces driving Kyrgyz political dynamics.

The Tulip Revolution that led to the removal of President Akayev in March 2005 is no exception in this respect.<sup>8</sup> At the elite level, the Revolution was supported by a coalition of disaffected political elites that had joined forces in the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan (PMK) since September 2004 and had accepted Kurmanbek Bakiyev as their leader.<sup>9</sup> Having little in common apart from their opposition towards the rule of Askar Akayev, the coalition immediately began to crumble once the goal of overthrowing the president had been achieved. In the aftermath of the Revolution and in the context of a series of political crises that hit the country in the first post-revolutionary months,<sup>10</sup> differences soon resurfaced and led to the

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<sup>7</sup> Kyrgyz interview partners repeatedly challenged the usefulness of the term opposition as an analytical category and shorthand for a group of actors. Respondents from both the opposition and the presidential camp tended to point to the fact that the boundaries are more fluid than the inflexible use of dichotomies would suggest.

<sup>8</sup> Other than my focus on political elites would suggest, the actions of (largely Bishkek-based) opposition elites are hardly the only story that could be told with respect to the Tulip Revolution. Rather, the revolution was significantly propelled by mobilization in the regions that was neither instigated, nor controlled by the central opposition leadership (see Lewis 2009, Temirkulov 2009). This perspective of the "two Revolutions" also tends to be confirmed by actors involved in the events (Interview with Kabay Karabekov, Bishkek, February 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See RFE/RL, 'New Political Bloc Formed in Kyrgyzstan,' 23 September 2004, (<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1054974.html>).

<sup>10</sup> This included the so called prison crisis culminating in autumn 2005 and involving a major prison revolt and the murder of MP Tynychbek Akmatbekov (see ICG 2005, 13), the Karasuu affair that unfolded at the same time and led to the death of another MP (ICG 2005), and later the long-lasting constitutional crisis in 2006 and 2007.

disbanding of the revolutionary coalition and the formation of a new opposition movement against Bakiyev within a matter of months (ICG 2005 and 2006). This not only exemplifies the extreme instability of elite alignments, but must also be seen as an important motivating factor behind Bakiyev's project of institution building.

The foundations for the new opposition movement that eventually consolidated into the movement For Reforms (*Za Reformy*) in the spring of 2006 were laid with the split of a number of key actors from the revolutionary coalition during the first year of Bakiyev's rule. The first of the former revolutionaries to fall out with the new president was Azimbek Beknazarov,<sup>11</sup> an influential supporter of the Revolution and the leader of the nationalist *Asaba* (Banner) party who had been appointed prosecutor general after the overthrow of President Akayev.<sup>12</sup> More defections were prompted by parliament's refusal to confirm the president's appointments to several cabinet posts between August and December 2005. The most famous of these cases was that of Roza Otunbaeva, former ambassador to the US and the UK under Akayev, deputy leader of the anti-Akayev opposition movement *Ata Zhurt*, and acting foreign minister after the Revolution. With parliament repeatedly refusing to endorse Otunbaeva as foreign minister, she ultimately defected from the ruling coalition and became a leader of the movement for constitutional reform in 2006. Another key figure in both the revolution of 2005 and the protest movement a year later, Member of Parliament and chairman of *Ata Meken* (Fatherland) party Omurbek Tekebayev, resigned from his post as speaker of the Zhogorku Kenesh in spring 2006 following a personal row with Bakiyev and joined the opposition.<sup>13</sup> This incident was followed a couple of weeks later by the resignation

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<sup>11</sup> A former judge and parliamentary deputy, Beknazarov had risen to prominence in the opposition against Akayev when he was arrested in 2002 for alleged misuse of office and his supporters staged protests that successfully pressured for his release. During these so called "Aksy events," six protesters were killed by the police, ultimately leading to the forced resignation of then Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiyev and laying the foundation for Beknazarov's reputation as a major opposition leader (see Radnitz 2005).

<sup>12</sup> In this capacity, Beknazarov started a vicious campaign to prosecute former cronies of the Akayev regime until he was forced to leave his new position in September 2005 in the wake of the Karasuu affair that had led to the death of Member of Parliament and alleged criminal leader Bayaman Erkinbaev. Claiming political motives for his removal from office, Beknazarov staged demonstrations in his native Aksy region and threatened to take his supporters to Bishkek, although he eventually refrained from doing so (see ICG 2005, 11). In the meantime, Beknazarov relinquished his post as chairman of *Asaba* party and Sovetbek Zhamaldinov was elected his successor at the head of the party in early 2008. Nevertheless it is safe to assume that Beknazarov remains the informal leader of the party (Interview with Sovetbek Zhamaldinov, head of *Asaba* party, Bishkek, April 2009).

<sup>13</sup> The incident on 7 February 2006 in which Tekebayev called President Bakiyev a dog and suggested he should "hang himself from the first tree" came as the culmination of a long-boiling conflict between Tekebayev and

of Minister for Trade, SDPK leader and key revolutionary Almazbek Atambayev in protest against the president's failure to implement reforms.<sup>14</sup>

By early 2006, several key actors<sup>15</sup> had thus already defected from the president's camp and began joining forces to form the movement For Reforms (*Za Reformy*). Reforming the constitution and limiting the powers of the president had been one of the Revolution's central demands and thus represented a minimal consensus around which the new opposition against Bakiyev could rally. Initially, constitutional reform seemed to have been given high priority: During the transitional period between the overthrow of Akayev in March and the presidential elections in July 2005, a committee on constitutional reform had been formed under the chairmanship of parliamentary speaker Omurbek Tekebayev that came up with a draft constitution significantly limiting presidential power in June 2005.<sup>16</sup> After having won the presidential elections in July 2005 however, Bakiyev formed his own committee on constitutional reform, personally assuming the post of chairman, and even beginning to hint at the possibility of postponing constitutional reforms until after the end of his first term then scheduled for 2010.

For Reforms started mass demonstrations for constitutional reform in the capital Bishkek in April 2006 after the first anniversary of the Revolution had passed without any of the promises of constitutional reform fulfilled. The coalition was far from homogenous, however. Whereas constitutional reform was the coalition's key demand, there were disagreements as to whether demands beyond that should be raised. More radical representatives of the opposition including Azimbek Beknazarov of *Asaba*, Omurbek Tekebayev of *Ata Meken*, and Temir Sariyev, at that time affiliated with SDPK and later founding member of *Ak Shumkar*, soon began to call for the president to step down, thus evoking uneasy memories of the 2005

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Bakiyev over issues of constitutional reform. Following this incident, Tekebayev offered his resignation from the post of speaker of parliament. Both his deputies, Bolotbek Sherniyazov and Erkin Alymbekov resigned in solidarity with Tekebayev (Interview with Bolotbek Sherniyazov, deputy chairman of *Ata Meken*, Bishkek, April 2009; also see RFE/RL, 'Kyrgyzstan: Resignation Triggers Political Showdown,' 15 February 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065809.html>).

<sup>14</sup> See RFE/RL, 'Kyrgyzstan's Trade Minister Resigns,' 21 April 2006, (<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067834.html>).

<sup>15</sup> In fact, according to Erica Marat, the key elite actors supporting the revolution were Almazbek Atambayev, Edil Baisalov, Azimbek Beknazarov, Roza Otunbaeva and Omurbek Tekebayev (Marat 2008, 231). If one takes this list as a point of reference, indeed all members of the coalition except Bakiyev himself had defected by early 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Omurbek Tekebayev, Bishkek, March 2009.

events.<sup>17</sup> More “constructive” parts, mainly represented by SDPK leader Almazbek Atambayev on the other hand, insisted that constitutional reform was the only goal and that this could best be achieved in cooperation with the authorities.<sup>18</sup>

These divisions were exacerbated when in November 2006, against the backdrop of renewed demonstrations by the movement for constitutional reform, Almazbek Atambayev, representing the moderate parts of the opposition, began to negotiate with the authorities allegedly without consulting his fellow leaders in For Reforms.<sup>19</sup> Following these negotiations, a new constitution was adopted that significantly strengthened parliament at the expense of the presidency and thus reflected some of the demands raised by For Reforms. Only weeks later however, on 30 December 2006, parliament adopted yet another constitution that revoked most of the concessions made to the opposition in the wake of the November protests.<sup>20</sup> For Reforms consequently resumed protests in the spring of 2007, but the internal divisions became more apparent still when Almazbek Atambayev assumed the post of Prime Minister in March 2007 as a result of his rapprochement with the president. At the same time former Prime Minister Feliks Kulov who had resigned in December 2006 and completed the chain of defections from the revolutionary coalition,<sup>21</sup> joined the opposition, and staged parallel demonstrations.

Thus, within less than two years, Bakiyev had lost the support of most of his former key allies in the political elite, including his “tandem” partner, former PM Feliks Kulov. What is more, these political elites not only defected from the president’s camp, but they turned into leaders

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<sup>17</sup> Interviews with Ata Meken leader Omurbek Tekebayev, Asaba leader Sovotbek Zhamaldinov, and Ak Shumkar leader Temir Sariyev, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews with deputy leader of the SDPK parliamentary bloc Isa Omurkulov and SDPK MP Osmonbek Artykbayev, Bishkek, March and April 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews with Za Reformy leaders Kabay Karabekov and Temir Sariyev, Bishkek, February and March 2009.

<sup>20</sup> See 24.kg, ‘58 deputies agree to approve new Constitution edition,’ 30 December 2006, (<http://eng.24.kg/politic/2006/12/30/897.html>).

<sup>21</sup> Feliks Kulov, chairman of *Ar Namys* (Honor) party, is a long-time oppositionist. After having served in various positions (including the vice presidency) under Akayev, Kulov co-founded *Ar Namys* in 1999 and became its first leader. In 2000 Kulov was arrested and a year later convicted by a military court. Freed by the 2005 Tulip Revolution, Kulov became one of the most promising challengers of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in the race for the presidency in 2005. Reportedly concerned for the stability and unity of the country, Kulov and Bakiyev chose to run on a joined ticket with Bakiyev promising to appoint Kulov prime minister in the case of being elected president. The Bakiyev/Kulov “tandem,” though never free of tensions, effectively held until Kulov resigned in December 2006 and joined the opposition in spring 2007. By now, Kulov heads a government agency for infrastructural development in the hydro-energy sector.

of a new protest movement demanding constitutional reform and (at least in parts) the resignation of President Bakiyev.

### **Ruling Party Creation**

Facing strong challenges by a group of disaffected elites that included some of the very same actors that had supported the ouster of Askar Akayev two years earlier, Bakiyev moved to regain the upper hand and to stabilize the situation in the second half of 2007.<sup>22</sup> This primarily took the form of taking back the initiative in the field of constitutional reform and reshaping the institutional face of the political system.

In May 2007, opposition deputies and members of For Reforms Melis Eshimkanov and Kabay Karabekov had filed legal complaints against both rounds of constitutional changes in 2006.<sup>23</sup> The constitutional court duly declared both, the December and the November constitutions unconstitutional and reaffirmed the legality of the 2003 constitution. Reacting to this, President Bakiyev called for a referendum on 21 October 2007 in which a new constitution and an electoral law based on party list voting would be adopted. The referendum was widely criticized by international observers as a sham exercise to push through constitutional changes to the liking of the incumbent elite (ICG 2008), whereas the new regulations themselves were greeted with mixed reactions by the opposition and independent observers. Most opposition representatives were generally in favor of introducing a PR system for parliamentary elections because they expected this to positively affect party system institutionalization;<sup>24</sup> on the other hand, the 2007 constitutional changes strengthened executive authority by bringing regional administration under the control of the president and thus contradicted the aims of the oppositional pro-reform movement (ICG 2008, 2).<sup>25</sup> In addition, the constitutional referendum arguably deprived the opposition of their unifying cause and thus prompted the dissolution of For Reforms.<sup>26</sup> With the new constitution adopted, Bakiyev dissolved parliament and called for early parliamentary elections on 16 December 2007 that would be held under the new PR electoral system.

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<sup>22</sup> This interpretation of Bakiyev's strategy of institution building is supported by members of the opposition and the presidential camp alike. Interviews with deputy chairman of SDPK parliamentary bloc Isa Omurkulov, leader of SDPK parliamentary bloc Bakyt Beshimov, Ak Zhol MP Dinara Moldosheva, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Kabay Karabekov, Bishkek, February 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Temir Sariyev, Bakyt Beshimov, Omurbek Tekebayev and Sovetbek Zhamaldinov, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Temir Sariyev, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Osmonbek Artykbayev, MP for SDPK, Bishkek, April 2009.

Complementing the new course, Bakiyev also announced the creation of a new pro-presidential ruling party that would represent his camp in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The foundation of this new presidential party was announced on 19 September 2007, the same day the president announced the constitutional referendum, but the party emerged only about a month later. In contrast to earlier attempts at ruling party formation in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>27</sup> the formation of *Ak Zhol* (Bright Path) was thus supported by the introduction of the PR electoral system that required candidates to run for political parties and established two separate thresholds for representation that significantly decreased the prospects of smaller political parties.<sup>28</sup> This signified that President Bakiyev and his advisers seriously aimed at transforming the political system and monopolizing access to political power.

When *Ak Zhol* was officially created on 15 October 2007, the party did not represent a coherent political force, but rather consolidated a number of pro-presidential parties and individuals into a single bloc with the ultimate aim of stabilizing the pro-presidential camp.<sup>29</sup> Among the more important parties and movements joining *Ak Zhol* were *Ata Zhurt*, an opposition movement against Akayev formed in 2004 among others by Roza Otunbayeva and Adahan Madumarov, *Maya Strana* (My Country), a liberal party founded by Medet Sadyrkulov, who was later to become chief of staff in Bakiyev's Presidential Administration and died in a mysterious car crash in early 2009, and a number of more obscure groups such as the allegedly Russian-sponsored *Sodruzhestvo* (Partnership) party, or *Truda i Edinstvo* (Labor and Unity) led by Tabyldy Orozaliyev. The uniting factor bringing these groups together was their readiness to support the president, rather than any ideological foundations.

Thus, on the level of formal political groups, *Ak Zhol* absorbed a number of pre-existing parties and movements supportive of the president and merged them into a single organization with the ultimate aim of enhancing control. A glimpse at *Ak Zhol's* candidate list for the 2007 elections further elucidates the logic of ruling party building in Kyrgyzstan. Headed by the former head of the Constitutional Court Cholpon Bayekova, the list includes a

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<sup>27</sup> Former President Askar Akayev had entrusted his daughter Bermet Akayeva with forming the pro-presidential *Alga Kyrgyzstan* party. This project, however, failed to concentrate political resources and did not survive the overthrow of Akayev.

<sup>28</sup> There was a nation-wide threshold of 5 percent and a regional threshold of 0.5 percent in each of the countries oblasts as well as the cities of Bishkek and Osh which have oblast status.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with Ak Zhol MPs Kabay Karabekov, Zainedin Kurmanov, Alisher Mamasaliev, and Dinara Moldosheva, Bishkek, February-April 2009.

mixture of long-term Bakiyev confidants such as Kubanichbek Isabekov,<sup>30</sup> wealthy businessmen such as Askar Salimbekov, the owner of the Dordoi bazaar, one of Central Asia's largest commercial hubs, a number of well-known political figures such as Kabay Karabekov, a former leader of the For Reforms movement, or Adahan Madumarov, former leader of *Sodruzhestvo* and co-founder of *Ata Zhurt*, as well as a number of incumbent MPs from the 2005-07 parliamentary term.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, however, the number of incumbent MPs on *Ak Zhol's* candidate list was rather low with only 25 incumbents (of 100 list positions) running for re-election on the ruling party's ticket. Taken together with an overall turnover rate of 77 percent in the 2007 elections,<sup>32</sup> this is indicative of the fact that renewing the composition of the Zhogorku Kenesh that had become too outspoken and powerful over the last two years and filling it with more reliable personnel was one of the most important aims of the 2007 elections.<sup>33</sup>

The process of composing the ruling party's candidate list for the 2007 elections was tightly controlled by the Presidential Administration and more concretely by then head of the Presidential Administration Medet Sadyrkulov. Given that the elections were scheduled for 16 December 2007 and *Ak Zhol* was only officially founded on 15 October 2007, the timeframe was extremely limited and prospective candidates did not apply through any formal mechanism of candidate selection, but were rather invited to join by high ranking party officials.<sup>34</sup> The final decision on the composition of the list was taken in the Presidential Administration without any formal decision making procedures within the party or any kind

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<sup>30</sup> Isabekov temporarily served as PM from December 2006 until March 2007 following the resignation of Feliks Kulov. Before that he served in several functions close to Bakiyev: he served as Chief of Staff in the Governor's office when Bakiyev was governor of Chuy, then he came along as head of the administrative department to the PM when Bakiyev became PM, and had to leave with him due to Aksy events in 2003. From 2005 to 2006, Isabekov was deputy Chief of Staff in Bakiyev's Presidential Administration, before he became Minister of Agriculture in 2006 and PM later that year (<http://www.kyrgyzreport.com/?p=359>).

<sup>31</sup> For a similar analysis of the party's candidate list see Wolters 2007 ([http://www.caucas.com/home\\_eng/breve\\_contenu.php?id=337](http://www.caucas.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=337)).

<sup>32</sup> This is based on РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ ВЫБОРОВ ДЕПУТАТОВ ЖОГОРКУ КЕНЕША КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ 27 ФЕВРАЛЯ И 13 МАРТА 2005 ГОДА, available at ([http://www.shailoo.gov.kg/downloads/parlamentskie/rezultaty\\_vyborov.doc](http://www.shailoo.gov.kg/downloads/parlamentskie/rezultaty_vyborov.doc)) and the candidate list of *Ak Zhol* for the 2007 elections available at (<http://shailoo.gov.kg/kg/show.php?tp=tx&cid=807&PHPSESSID=81058bca849d6381e168d1ea0c91d2a6>).

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with Zainedin Kurmanov, MP for Ak Zhol, Osmonbek Artykbayev, MP for SDPK, and with Bakyt Beshimov, leader of SDPK parliamentary bloc, Bishkek, March and April 2009. Also see (ICG 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Based on interviews with Ak Zhol MPs, Bishkek, February to April 2009.

of formalized competition between aspiring candidates.<sup>35</sup> This extremely centralized and highly intransparent mechanism of choosing candidates arguably serves as one of the main tools of enhancing control over the pro-presidential camp.

Thus, when early parliamentary elections were held on 16 December 2007, the pro-presidential camp had joined forces in *Ak Zhol*, whereas the opposition remained fragmented into four major parties competing against each other as well as against *Ak Zhol*. This not only further weakened the stance of the opposition in the elections, but exacerbated the existing divisions in the oppositional camp.<sup>36</sup>

### **Consolidating Power: The Elections Kyrgyzstan Was Supposed to Have...**

The 2007 elections carried the logic of centralization from the pro-presidential camp to the wider political system. Harshly criticized by domestic and international observers (NDI/TRI 2007, OSCE/ODIHR 2007), the first semi-official result announced on the day after the elections was a 100 percent “victory” for the presidential *Ak Zhol* party.<sup>37</sup> Only then the results were fixed to include two additional parties, the Communists and the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) with eleven and eight seats respectively. Still, *Ak Zhol* controls 71 of the 90 seats in the current Zhogorku Kenesh, or about 79 percent, leaving the pro-presidential Communists with 12 percent and SDPK, the only real opposition force, with a mere 8 percent of the seats. These blatant manipulations completely dissociated the composition of the Zhogorku Kenesh from the actual votes cast in the elections and effectively reduced the once recalcitrant Kyrgyz parliament to a pliant rubberstamp of policies emanating from the Presidential Administration.

Altogether, 12 political parties competed in the 2007 elections, among them *Ak Zhol* and the Communists, as well as some minor parties on the pro-presidential side, and *Ata Meken*, SDPK, *Asaba*, and *Ar Namys* as the main representatives of the opposition. The list of *Ata*

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<sup>35</sup> Respondents affirmed that there was competition on an informal level with individual candidates protesting their position on the list and sometimes achieving a higher placement. In general, however, *Ak Zhol* members were unaware of how and when exactly the decisions were taken. Interviews with *Ak Zhol* MPs, Bishkek, February to April 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of *Ata Meken*, referred to this when explaining the fact that the opposition did not manage to present a common stand against electoral manipulation after the 2007 elections (interview with Tekebayev, Bishkek, March 2009).

<sup>37</sup> See Reuters, ‘OSCE critical as Kyrgyz party wins all seats,’ 17 December 2007, (<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1757594720071217>).

*Meken* represented an electoral coalition between that party and *Ak Shumkar*. Due to the fact that Kyrgyz electoral law requires parties to run individually and prohibits formal electoral coalitions, *Ak Shumkar* members joined the *Ata Meken* list to formally run as members of the latter group.<sup>38</sup> In order to gain seats in parliament, a party had to reach 5 percent of the national vote and another 0.5 percent in each of the country's seven *oblasts*, as well as the cities of Bishkek and Osh. This second barrier, arguably introduced to prevent ethnically based smaller parties from gaining representation (ICG 2008, 4), was a source of considerable confusion. Since the text of the electoral code failed to state on what basis the second 0.5 percent hurdle was to be calculated, this important detail was left for the Central Election Commission (CEC) to decide.

The CEC's original decision was that this threshold should be calculated against the number of all registered voters nationwide, a decision against which *Ak Zhol* appealed. Only two days after the election, the Supreme Court invalidated this decision of the CEC and ruled that the 0.5 threshold was to be calculated against the number of registered voters in each district (see ICG 2008, 4; OSCE/ODIHR 2007). As the OSCE/ODIHR report diplomatically states, "the belated adjustment" of a fundamental part of the electoral rules of the game in the 2007 elections, effectively meant that "election stakeholders did not fully comprehend on what basis they were contesting the elections until after election day" (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, 4).

These were minor problems when compared to the extent of more or less open manipulations, however. International observers from the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and from OSCE noted widespread violations on basically all levels of the electoral process that, in the words of the IRI/NDI joint statement, suggested that the allocation of seats in the newly elected parliament did "not correspond to Kyrgyzstan's commitment under the OSCE's Copenhagen Document [...] to count and report honestly and publicly ballots cast by a free voting procedure" (see IRI & NDI 2007, 1; also see OSCE/ODIHR 2007). Domestic observers affiliated with opposition parties or independent NGOs also noted an unprecedented increase in violations and produced alternative protocols that reflect the extent of manipulations with some accuracy.<sup>39</sup> Overall,

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<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Temir Sariyev, leader of Ak Shumkar, and Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of Ata Meken, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>39</sup> These alternative vote tabulations usually see Ata Meken as the strongest party with about a third of the national vote (interviews with Asiya Sasykbayeva, director of NGO International Center Interbilim, Bodosh Mamyrova, member of Ar Namys political council, Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of Ata Meken, Bishkek, March 2009).

the degree of manipulation in the 2007 elections reached such an extent that, as one election observer affiliated with the opposition concluded, in effect “the president and his team actually appointed the MPs. They were not elected.”<sup>40</sup>

Arguably, the Presidential Administration even overproduced in their attempts to secure favorable electoral outcomes and a controllable parliament. After being left with a single-party parliament on the day after the elections, the results were again manipulated so as to include two opposition parties, SDPK and the Communists, before the final results were published on 20 December 2007.<sup>41</sup> A comparison of the different preliminary and the final results published by the CEC reveals this somewhat crude exercise in electoral manipulation (see OSCE/ODIHR 2007, 27). In the case of the Communists, their number of votes almost doubled from the preliminary results published on 17 December to the next tabulation published two days later. Thus, while the party received the votes of about 2.68 percent of registered voters in the preliminary results based on 95 percent of polling stations, it climbed to an impressive 5.05 percent of registered voters (just above the threshold) in the results based on 99 percent of polling stations (OSCE/ODIHR 2007, 27). In a similar manner, SDPK’s number of votes increased by an implausible 47,551 when the results of the last polling station were added. Given the fact that the Electoral Code provides for a maximum of 2,500 registered voters per polling station, this number is obviously fictitious. Nevertheless, the “results” from this last polling station pushed the SDPK over the 5 percent hurdle.

These obvious manipulations and the fact that the only two “opposition” parties in the current Zhogorku Kenesh were added by tampering with vote tabulations indicates that access to parliament in 2007 was more a matter of negotiations with the Presidential Administration than of winning votes on election day. Whereas the Communists cannot properly be considered an opposition party in the first place but must rather be seen as the extended arm of the pro-presidential camp, SDPK’s inclusion into parliament, according to one of that party’s parliamentary deputies, was settled when its leader, Almazbek Atambayev, held the office of prime minister in much of 2007 until shortly before the elections. This, together with the conciliatory stance the party had taken during the protests for constitutional reform in 2006/07 arguably qualified it for representation in the current parliament.<sup>42</sup> Similar

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with domestic election observer, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>41</sup> In the words of Isa Omurkulov, deputy leader of the SDPK bloc in the Zhogorku Kenesh, the electoral managers in the Presidential Administration were simply ashamed of Ak Zhol’s 100 percent victory (interview with Omurkulov, Bishkek, March 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Osmonbek Artybayev, MP for SDPK, Bishkek, April 2009.

negotiations took place between Medet Sadyrkulov, then head of the Presidential Administration, and Omurbek Tekebayev as a representative of *Ata Meken* in the aftermath of the elections.<sup>43</sup> Reportedly, Sadyrkulov offered *Ata Meken* a substantial number of seats in parliament that would have made the party the largest opposition bloc in exchange for the party's sacking of Kubatbek Baibolov who was second on its candidate list. In the end, however, these negotiations came to nothing and *Ata Meken* is not represented in the current *Zhogorku Kenesh*.

The role of negotiations with the Presidential Administration in gaining access to formal political representation is an important indicator for the centralization of political power in post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan. Far from accidental, the extent of manipulation in the 2007 elections allowed the Presidential Administration to act as a gatekeeper to formal representation in the Kyrgyz political system and forced opposition forces to negotiate their way in.

Even more significant is the fact that the opposition apparently acquiesced to the Presidential Administration's machinations. Given the role of manipulated elections in the 2005 Revolution (Kulov 2008), this might seem surprising at first sight. Several factors can account for the fact that the opposition did not mobilize their supporters to an extent similar to 2005 in protest against the 2007 elections. The most important of these factors is the new electoral system that was arguably introduced with exactly this effect in mind.<sup>44</sup> Whereas the 2005 Revolution had started with protests by disappointed candidates, primarily from the south of the country, and had only later spread to the national level with the active support of opposition elites (Radnitz 2006), this factor was eliminated by the introduction of the list electoral system. The combination of personal motives for protest on the level of individual candidates in the regions with a national campaign against electoral manipulation and for the resignation of the president that was one of the main characteristics of the 2005 Revolution was thus effectively prevented by "depersonalizing" the electoral process through the introduction of the list system. Opposition elites have been cut off from the vital mobilizational support they possessed during 2005. Moreover, given the lack of time to coordinate in the run up to the elections, the list electoral system forced the highly fragmented opposition to compete against each other and thus exacerbated conflicts within their ranks.

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<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of *Ata Meken*, and Asiya Sasykbayeva, director of NGO International Center Interbilim and member of *Ata Meken*, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Dinara Moldasheva, MP for *Ak Zhol*, Bishkek, March 2009.

In addition, the opposition was taken by surprise in 2007 in several ways. First, the short timeframe and the insecurity about the electoral rules arguably prevented the opposition from preparing properly for the electoral contest. Secondly, and more importantly, opposition actors, especially from *Ata Meken*, were left under the impression of having won a considerable share of seats in the Zhogorku Kenesh until the final results were published four days after the elections. Although they of course knew that there were extensive manipulations and contemplated limited protests on a regional level against the actions of particular regional electoral commissions,<sup>45</sup> the prospect of still being included by post-electoral negotiations arguably kept them from engaging in large scale mobilization.<sup>46</sup>

If the following local elections of 2008 are any indication, the 2007 early parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan seem to have introduced a new pattern of electoral management in the country that is meant to consolidate power at the center of the political system, to simultaneously reign in elected institutions and to deprive elite challengers of representation in the formal political system. By monopolizing access to the formal political sphere with the help of the new ruling party *Ak Zhol*, Bakiyev has arguably managed to reduce his dependence on his former elite allies, most of which were represented in the old parliament. The “president’s strategists were determined to break the symbiotic relationship between government and opposition, establishing in its place a monopoly over patronage. The opposition’s days are numbered, a fundamental change is underway in the political system, and there is no room for the opposition [...]” (ICG 2008, 3).

### **Conclusions: Towards the Consolidation of Autocracy?**

Kyrgyz politics since independence were always characterized by strong volatility and unpredictability of elite alignments. Unlike some of their Central Asian colleagues, neither former President Akayev, nor current President Bakiyev managed to form a coherent and stable ruling coalition. This paper argued that an attempt to establish precisely such a stable and cohesive ruling coalition is at the heart of President Bakiyev’s consolidation strategy since 2007. This strategy has several parts. By consolidating the pro-presidential camp into a single “party of power,” control over actors supportive of the president is enhanced. Access to the presidential support coalition is now tightly controlled by the Presidential Administration through the centralized composition of a candidate list. Secondly, the monopolization of

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Asiya Sasykbayeva, director of the NGO International Center Interbilim, who observed the elections for *Ata Meken* in Batken oblast, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of *Ata Meken*, Bishkek, March 2009.

access to the formal political arena by *Ak Zhol* increases the incentives for members of the support coalition to remain loyal because alternative routes of access are largely blocked and because continued loyalty is likely to produce future payoffs. In addition, the 2007 elections effectively deprived many of Bakiyev's main opponents from within the political elite of representation in the formal political arena. Whereas almost all current opposition leaders had been members of the outgoing parliament, electoral manipulation in the 2007 elections excluded these actors from the *Zhogorku Kenesh*. Access to parliament in the current set-up of the political system depends mainly on negotiations with the president, rather than electoral victory.

Whereas the strategy of institution building seems to have been rather successful so far, its long-term success depends mainly on the extent to which Bakiyev will manage to marginalize his elite opponents not only in terms of formal political representation, but also in terms of social support. The current political situation with a parliament dominated by *Ak Zhol* is an ideal situation for establishing *Ak Zhol* not only as a dominant force in parliament, but also as a major channel of state patronage to the individual regions of the country. Whereas the parliamentary opposition is largely prevented from reaching out to local constituents because of their negligible numbers and occasional interventions by the state,<sup>47</sup> *Ak Zhol* has established a system in which individual deputies are responsible for establishing and upholding contacts to specific regions of the country that largely compensates for the loss of such direct interaction under the PR electoral system.<sup>48</sup> *Ak Zhol* is thus clearly trying to further isolate the opposition by establishing itself as the central channel of interaction between local constituents and political elites.

Thus, Kyrgyzstan under Kurmanbek Bakiyev is moving toward the consolidation of a more closed and centralized authoritarian regime. The success of this strategy in the last analysis depends on whether Bakiyev will be able to maintain a stable support coalition in the form of *Ak Zhol* without at the same time alienating too many members of the political elite and thus producing a powerful alternative political force. So far, Bakiyev seems to have managed this balancing act rather successfully. His main elite challengers are excluded from the formal political system and the pro-presidential *Ak Zhol* party is actively working to monopolize patronage networks in the regions. Moreover, the opposition in the months since the 2007 elections seemed unable to present a sustained challenge to the incumbent. Protests in March 2009 remained confined to a single day, despite the fact that opposition leaders announced

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Isa Omurkulov, deputy leader of SDPK bloc, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with *Ak Zhol* MPs Dinara Moldosheva and Zainedin Kurmanov, Bishkek, March and April 2009.

their intention to initiate a sustained campaign until the presidential elections in July.<sup>49</sup> The next test of the viability of Bakiyev's new system of elite management will be the early presidential elections in July. The opposition in large parts rallied around SDPK leader Almazbek Atambayev as a single opposition candidate and *Ata Meken* and SDPK even announced their merger under the new name of Social Democratic Party *Ata Meken*.<sup>50</sup> In the (relatively likely) event of electoral manipulations in the 2009 presidential elections moreover, the opposition threatened to protest the results.<sup>51</sup> If the opposition can mobilize enough resources to pose a real challenge to the regime of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections remains to be seen. The experience of the last years of Bakiyev's rule, however, points in the opposite direction.

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<sup>49</sup> Interviews with opposition leaders Temir Sariyev and Sovotbek Zhamaldinov, Bishkek, March 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with SDPK MP Osmonbek Bartykbayev and *Ata Meken* deputy leader Bolotbek Sherniyazov, Bishkek, April 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with *Ata Meken* deputy leader Bolotbek Sherniyazov, Bishkek, April 2009.

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